

LEADING WITHOUT LEAVING THE CLASSROOM

Tap into teachers' skills and knowledge to solve school problems

BY CATHY OWENS

Never before has the need been so great for classroom teachers to become agents of change and position themselves as problem solvers at the school building level. Teachers are uniquely positioned to assume leadership roles on a variety of tasks that could transform schools from more traditional workplaces into professional learning communities.

Schools' most complex problems are best solved by those working in them daily and grappling with the challenging issues first-hand. Teachers' daily experiences foster an

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My journey to leadership

I have fond memories of my induction to teacher leadership. I made the transition once I grew weary of listening to my colleagues gripe about the monthly staff development days where students were released from school three hours early so teachers could get “professionally developed.” We had to report to the auditorium to sit and get inspired by motivational speakers who talked at us about teaching with power, stirring our passion, and going with gusto. Meanwhile, I sat in the back of the room and marked up yearbook proofs with power and gusto.

What really stirred my passion was learning that these speakers were being paid thousands of dollars — professional development dollars — that I knew could be used to serve staff learning needs. I recruited a colleague to be my thinking partner and, together, we created a writing-across-the-curriculum plan where cross-departmental leadership teams assisted content teachers in adding at least one writing assignment to their weekly lessons. The goal was a 15% increase in our school’s overall score on the state-mandated student writing exam. We presented the idea to the principal, who approved, and then to the staff, who not only cheered, but were fully present at our monthly three-hour data review and writing workshops led by cross-curricular team coaches. At the end of the year, writing scores increased by 27% overall, and the prin-



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incipal used the leftover staff development dollars to take all of us to a catered picnic in the park.

Looking back, I realize that initially I was behaving as part of the problem and not the solution. Rather than providing honest input and feedback on the staff development sessions, I silently went

along with a program I clearly did not see as beneficial. This in no way helped my principal, who was under pressure to provide mandated staff development that may or may not fit his staff’s needs.

The solution to the staff development problem was something I and my colleagues understood all along, yet we neither volunteered our opinion nor felt it was invited. But as representatives of the teaching staff and thinking partners with the leadership staff, we were able to build bridges. The camaraderie that grew out of our collaborative planning was a rewarding milestone. While we met the overarching goal to increase student writing scores, we experienced other added benefits that helped create a professional learning culture in the school so teachers were not only glad to step up and lead but welcomed to do so.

inside view of what can be done. This inside advantage allows school-based teacher leaders to more creatively and often more quickly design solutions that get to the core of a school’s problem long before an outsider has had time to review and assess what the school may need.

This is not to say that outside help from consultants is not at times necessary or helpful. Indeed, it can be. However, when teachers sit at the decision-making table, they can most efficiently respond to a school’s needs. In my travels across the U.S. and Canada helping teachers enhance

their skills and strengths as leaders, I repeatedly hear the same feedback about what they encounter at work. They say, “Our schools don’t need someone on the outside to come in and fix our problems. As teachers, we need to be *first responders*, offering the best and most practical solutions.”

HOW TEACHERS CAN LEAD

Teachers have the potential to lead the profession, not just their individual practice. As leaders of learning communities, they can engage in deep collaborations that contribute to the overall effectiveness of schools. They

can assume leadership roles that will effect positive change in how other teachers teach, how all students learn, and how a professional learning community operates.

For example, teachers who are given flexible schedules such as an additional planning period may use that time to facilitate learning team meetings or model an effective lesson for new teachers. In schools with an influx of new staff, veteran teachers can create a welcoming team to ensure that newcomers have an easy transition. They may create learning circles for novice teachers to get infor-

mal refreshers on new math or literacy concepts or other content. Through distributed leadership, teacher leaders might assist the principal by designing staff development, contributing to agenda planning for faculty meetings, serving on site-based leadership teams, writing and managing grants, performing classroom walk-throughs, and leading schoolwide learning events. There are so many tasks that must be done for schools to make their visions a reality. The teachers in those schools are able to take the lead. Why don't they?

Often they know exactly what to do to improve a school's teaching and learning environment, but they are often not seen and, in some cases, do not see themselves as an integral part of school improvement teams. Historically, classroom teachers have been viewed as the ones who "kept the kids" while the "official" leaders made the big decisions. Teachers were responsible for implementing programs and policies, not designing them. Their job was to stay with the students. If they wanted to do any leading — a task solely reserved for the principal — they had to leave the classroom to do so. For years, becoming a principal was the only option for teachers who wanted to lead.

DEVELOPING A LEADERSHIP MINDSET

Teachers can take initiative by first recognizing their role in ensuring the success of all students and, second, by being willing to assume more responsibility for putting solutions in place. This starts with sharing an idea or having candid conversations with colleagues about what can happen without being stifled by what has happened in the past. Teachers have to be able to ask the hard questions, grapple with the difficult answers, and do the hard work necessary for effecting change. They must be willing to team with colleagues and principals in

order to shape internal policies and practices that change the way they work.

In stepping up, teachers must also be consciously competent as well as consciously incompetent. Not only must they acknowledge what they know but they must also realize and take measures to learn what they do not know. To be able to lead, teachers must have the knowledge and skills — emotional intelligence, trust building, facilitation, adult learning theory — necessary to engage colleagues.

WAYS TO LEAD

As agents of change who choose not to leave the classroom but rather to lead from the classroom, teachers can make steps toward leadership by helping colleagues with teaching methods. They can model best practices, share student evaluation methods, and videotape and review each other's teaching.

More importantly, teachers can offer solutions to some of the school's most challenging questions. For example, how do we accommodate the needs of at-risk students while simultaneously responding to the needs of advanced learners?

Classroom teachers have varying levels of skills for differentiating instruction for all learners. A teacher leader might address this challenge by identifying two or three teachers who have expertise in differentiation and asking them to lead learning labs for their colleagues. They may form monthly study groups to review and assess the needs of challenged students and collaboratively develop individualized learning plans to help those students achieve.

Another challenging question may be: How do we use achievement data to better assess student learning? Schools and districts are awash in data. A teacher leader can lead conversations on data-driven decision making. He or she can help principals

collect and provide samples of assessment data and then walk colleagues through not only the review process but also the next actions necessary to ensure application of new knowledge.

Perhaps the most daunting questions are: How do we ensure that teachers get effective, job-embedded professional learning every day, and how can we ensure that this adult learning transfers into classroom practice? Teachers with an awareness of both student and teacher needs are in the best position to help principals shape professional learning. Teachers may choose to join the school improvement planning team and create a schoolwide professional learning curriculum. They can research and share strategies for job-embedded learning. They can help develop flexible teaching schedules that allow for more team planning, encourage peer observation, promote on-the-job coaching, and foster daily reflection on practice.

Collaborating with colleagues and principals through shared leadership roles will push new teacher leaders to do more and help them develop skills to become more effective.

Through shared leadership teams, teacher leaders can get engaged in "the work behind the work," meaning the professional tasks in addition to the instruction of students, that require new business processes and staff protocols necessary for making a school's reform goals a reality. Teachers can share practical strategies for school improvement with principals who, as both team players and the final decision makers, are able to ensure implementation of these strategies.

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THE TIME IS RIPE

I believe that the 21st century has opened a new door for teachers. Those who have found solutions in their classes can share that knowledge with their departments and grade-level teams. The teams can share new information with other teams and, before long, the school establishes a teaching and learning culture where leading without leaving is the intended goal and not an outcome by default. This trend relies on a new approach to school-based leadership where principals don't want to go it alone and recognize that teachers have the expertise to provide help.

Across the nation, various models of shared leadership demonstrate that principals are seeing more consistent gains in student achievement when they don't allow problems to accumulate on their desks. Rather, they share with staff the problems as well as the responsibility and credit for solving them. We all know that the achievement gap, one of today's most critical

concerns, does not start and stop with the data on the principal's desk. A progressive principal will engage a team of thinkers, planners, and "gap closers" to assess the situation, recommend approaches for how to address it, create a plan of action, and then garner support from colleagues to make it happen. These principals have given teacher leaders a level of autonomy that encourages strategic thinking and, thereby, have built a level of reliance their teachers deeply appreciate. Visionary principals both accept and elevate the teachers' voice on school issues because they believe that in a learning community, every voice matters, not just the loudest.

American education is on the cusp of what may be its most radical transitions. With swift advancements in technology, major shifts in federal policy, and far-from-traditional school structures, the work of school leaders is beyond the scope of the two or three people who have been formally assigned to it. Teaching and learning

today demand education programs and strategies that have more than potential for achievement gains down the road; application must yield more immediate results. Therefore, the timing for improving schools from the inside out is now. The timing for teachers to lead is now. This requires a change in our thinking, a change in our leadership, and a change in our system for how we do school. Systemic change begins with teachers who are willing to lead, principals who support their doing so, and school communities that are seeking change for a very long time. The reason for change remains the same as ever: Students are at stake. In the words of Roland Barth: Students learn when teachers lead (Barth, 1999).

REFERENCE

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